

Chapter 1.1

Creating and Sustaining Community in a Virtual Environment

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ABSTRACT

We are currently living in an electronic age where it is easier to travel the world, stay in touch with people who live away from our face-to-face environment without the need to leave home or to meet in a real life situation than ever before. The Web is becoming a place where we encounter others in ways to get our personal, social, and professional needs met. As a result of this growing phenomenon individuals are seeking to be a part of online communities of individuals who interact and associate with one another through the Web and the use of modern technology. This chapter will provide an insight into the use of information communication technology to create and sustain community.

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'Technology.... the knack of so arranging the world that we need not experience it'. -- Max Frisch, (1911-91), Swiss novelist and dramatist in Oxford Dictionary of Quotations (2004, p.335:1).

INTRODUCTION

How is a web-based community different from one in a face-to-face environment? Both are the same in the way they involve the member of that community and the way one interacts with another member of the community. In brief, a virtual community is simply a community that happens to exist online, rather than in a classroom or other venue where individuals come together. I first realized the power of online instruction in 1999 when volunteers were sought to develop online courses and to teach them at the university where I am employed.

For most instructors, the first few years were very basic and addressed the learning of content materials. The online courses included studying vocabulary, memorizing terms, and completing assignments in a private setting, usually alone at one's computer. As time went on, it was realized that students enrolled in the courses were not getting the opportunity to interact with classmates and some students could not survive without this. My own courses which I taught in the Special Education credential/ masters program evolved to include this interaction both in synchronous and asynchronous settings. After seven years of teaching online I have developed my courses to the point where my classes are becoming very interactive. This was in part the result of creating assignments where the students were required to work together. This was also the result of the scheduling of my time for all of us to dialogue with one another with more active participation on my part as a community member in the class, using this to model and direct students to follow my example.

This chapter will help the person who is a community builder online to identify the dynamics and method of establishing successful web communities. It also addresses the key issues that web-based communities face and ways to design opportunities for interaction among the members of that community. The roles, rituals and events that bring people together into a group inside a virtual environment and make them into an online community are examined.

BACKGROUND

Virtual communities, or online communities, are used when individuals within a personal or professional group choose to interact with each other via the Internet. It does not necessarily mean that there is a strong bond among the members as is the case with a face-to-face group. Interaction in a virtual community takes place through email,

chat rooms, synchronous learning sessions, etc. An email distribution list may have hundreds of members and the communication which takes place may be merely informational (questions and answers are posted), but members may remain relative strangers and the membership turnover rate could be high. This is in line with the liberal use of the term "community."

It is useful to examine definitions of what a learning community is meant to be. According to Chang (2003) a learning community is 'a group that shares ideas and information with all members of the community'. It is also a place where spontaneous learning and active knowledge construction takes place by the individual learners within the community. Chang continues to define this community as 'a virtual social organization of learners who share knowledge and experiences, exchange information as well as collaboratively solve problems in the pursuit of a common learning objective or interest' (p.28).

Thomas Sergiovanni (1993) defines community as 'a collection of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are binded to a set of shared ideas and ideals' (p.xvi). The members of the community have sought membership into this particular group. Communities don't happen randomly but are systematically organized and expanded.

It is not easy trying to create a virtual community of people in an online format unless it is planned and opportunities for interaction are specifically built into the online program. A person who is "surfing" the Internet for information but not dialoging with someone else is not a member of a community in the truest sense. The stage has to be set for community to develop. It is possible in an online environment to involve others and to heighten one's awareness of learning strategies, abilities and preferences. The planning of such opportunities must be specific in an online environment but should be deliberately designed as an integral part of an online program. Today more and more opportunities are being developed

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